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State's pre-K accessibility among best

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Since 1990, thousands of children with developmental delays and low-income families have been afforded the opportunity to get an early start in preschool, helping them to kindergarten with the same skills as their peers.

Nearly 20 years ago, the Kentucky Education Reform Act began partially funding a mandatory preschool program for those children ages 3 and 4, and now the state is gaining national recognition for it. The National Institute for Early Education Research released its annual report card, assessing each state's percent of children enrolled in preschool, as well as the amount of state spending on each of those children.

Kentucky ranked in the top 15 states for accessibility, while remaining midrange for spending.

Lisa Gross, spokeswoman for the Kentucky Department of Education, said the commonwealth has been leading in state-funded preschool since the program was started in 1990. Since then, the program has expanded to reach more children.

"This is not a surprise," Gross said. "It really is a testament to the work done in this state to improve accessibility and get resources to kids who need them most ... this is just another item we can use to say your investment is paying off."

Kentucky currently serves 24,000 students, Gross said, and while the recent study ranked it sixth in the country for accessibility to 3-year-olds and 13th for 4-year-olds, officials would like to see the program grow to reach 100,000 more students.

But first, the funding must be provided.

Kentucky spends about \$3,500 per child in pre-kindergarten programming. The national average is \$4,061 per child, as the report showed a national trend toward increased enrollment and spending.

Vicki Writsel, associate superintendent for learning programs at Bowling Green Independent Schools, said 80 students are enrolled in the city's program at Parker-Bennett-Curry Elementary School. Both of the teachers meet with two classes for half the day, with multiple assistants helping reach the students. Writsel said during her 11 years in Bowling Green, the program has grown and changed dynamically.

"When I first started, there were very few children learning English as a second language and now over half the children are," she said. "A lot of our families are international and have a lot of young children so early on we saw a the necessity of having a bilingual staff."

Having a good working relationship with the Head Start program, as well as many private preschools, has helped the program ensure students have access to programs, she said.

Preschool teachers can plan with kindergarten teachers, Writsel said, to ensure the skills they are teaching will be those students will need when they join their peers in elementary school.

"We have noticed that the children who go to pre-school are ready and socially sound and understand a routine when they go to kindergarten," she said. "They are used to the protocol of the cafeteria and have confidence in themselves in school ... even the parents do. They have the confidence to talk to the kindergarten teachers."

In the recent study, Kentucky also met eight of 10 benchmark requirements, which include having screenings and referrals for vision, hearing and health as well as a teacher's specialized training in pre-kindergarten. The state missed the mark on requiring assistant teacher degrees and requiring monitoring in addition to the state's required site visits.

Writsel said officials in Bowling Green monitor the preschoolers, and can work with them in smaller groups to ensure they understand letters, sounds and counting.

"We monitor strongly to hold ourselves accountable, but it gives us the assurance that they are making progress because we can see the growth from the beginning to the end of the year," she said.

Writsel said in most cases, the students who enter the program with delays in speech and language skills are brought up to speed with other students by the time they enter kindergarten. She said even students with severe disabilities – who must learn to walk, speak or eat – see improvements from the program.

“We see such rapid growth when teams of professionals including the occupational therapists, the physical therapists the teachers and parents come together,” she said. “When you work together to plan for children and have the opportunity to work with them every day, it really makes an impact and helps them overcome the delays they exhibit when they first come to us.”